

Circus Fire Memorial To Be Dedicated

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The long-awaited Hartford Circus Fire Memorial will be dedicated Wednesday, 61 years to the day since the fire took 168 lives in the single most deadly event in Connecticut history.

Harry Lichtenbaum of Wethersfield, a survivor of the 1944 fire, attended the groundbreaking ceremony last July and said he is "very anxious" to see the finished monument. He plans on attending the dedication ceremony, which is set for 12:30 p.m. at the Fred D. Wish Elementary School at 350 Barbour St., Hartford.

"I think it's a wonderful thing," he said of the memorial. "There's no such thing as closure ... we'll live with it until our dying day.

Lichtenbaum, who was 13 at the time of the fire, recalls that he was not supposed to attend the performance, but because the circus was late setting up the tent, a planned July 5 matinee performance never took place. Those who had tickets were allowed into the July 6 matinee.

Lichtenbaum said it was a stroke of luck that he and his sister sat near an exit that was not blocked by cages. At the time of the fire, many of the exits were blocked by the cages used to get the animals into the center ring.

"That wouldn't be allowed now," Lichtenbaum said. "We've learned our lesson over the years."

The memorial was initially scheduled to be dedicated in November 2004. But because the bronze centerpiece that features the names of the victims was not completed at that time, the dedication was delayed.

Designed by DuBose Associates and TO Design, the memorial is in the park directly behind Wish school. A committee of volunteers headed by Hartford Fire Chief Charles A. Teale Sr.; Kathy Spada Basto, a Hartford teacher whose mother survived the fire; city Treasurer Kathleen Palm; and State Rep. Marie Kirkley-Bey, raised \$125,000 in three years to build the memorial. The majority of the money came from the purchase of bricks featured at the memorial and from the families of the victims.

The memorial stretches along a dirt path, along which are six pedestals. The first pedestal provides information about the night of the fire. Each succeeding pedestal gives an account of what happened at a particular minute. The final pedestal tells

visitors that they are within the perimeter of the big top.

Directly in front of the visitor is a bronze disk that features the names of the 168 victims. The disk is at the location of the circus tent's center pole. Surrounding the names are bricks that contain messages from survivors, family members of the victims and others instrumental in helping create the memorial.

On the perimeter of the disk are four benches where visitors can reflect. Dogwood trees planted around the memorial outline the shape of the tent.

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